

# The Princess Beatrice

**Antony Dunford**

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‘How can man fly?’ Jemadar said to the clouds, but quietly, so the officer didn’t hear him.

It might not have mattered. The officer was watching the three aeroplanes with amazement too. Jemadar, three other men, and the officer were on a roof, out of range of the guns. The officer had a table and chair where he drank. The men had the roof.

The aeroplanes were flying towards them, in and out of the clouds. It hadn’t rained for four days. The dry season was starting. Footrot would reduce, but summer brought its own problems. Four months when it would be over forty degrees. Jemadar was used to it, the Punjab was hotter than here. The officers were not. It was barely thirty degrees and they were already complaining.

The Ottoman guns started firing. The aeroplanes moved higher all at the same time as if they were tied together. They kept getting closer to the town even as they climbed.

One of the aeroplanes started to trail smoke. It had been hit. It started to sink, still heading towards them.

The other two kept going, and things started to fall from them, like birds shitting in flight. This must be the supplies. The aeroplanes looked so small. How could what they carried make a difference to the thousands of men in the town?

The first things they dropped landed in the Ottoman trenches.

Others landed inside the walls. Then others landed in the Tigris.

Jemadar was watching the falling aeroplane. It was heading straight for him, a tail of black smoke behind it that remained in the sky, a memory of its passing.

The aeroplane hit the flat roof of one of the houses just inside the walls. It bounced, twisted, broke apart, and crashed to the ground.

The officer had gone, run off somewhere. Jemadar grabbed his rifle and ran for the stairs.

When Jemadar got to the wreck there were others around it, but they were staying back, afraid.

Jemadar was not afraid. He had seen so much death, so much pointless death, he was already dead in his heart.

He ran to the wreck, the ruin of this thing that had been in the sky.

It was small, and light, which it must be to stay in the air. Its nose had broken off and was over there, the casing shattered, the name of the aeroplane, 'The Princess Beatrice', still legible. Within the nose was an engine. Jemadar knew engines. That one came from a tractor.

The wings were broken off, the cabin crushed, the tail somewhere else. Two seats, a pilot and a man to man the guns. But because the aeroplane was carrying supplies they'd taken out the guns. The man in the gun seat was dead, shot through the head by the Ottoman gunners who had hit the engine. The man in the pilot seat was not.

'Sir, we will get you out,' Jemadar said, looking at the twisted metal and trying to work out how. The man was crushed within the broken cockpit.

'I doubt that,' the man said, his voice simply pain, his eyes tight shut.

'Are you from England, sir?' Jemadar said. The man's accent was strange.

'Adelaide, mate. Other direction,' the man said.

'I have not heard of that, sir,' Jemadar said, with no idea what to do. He was next to the man now, close enough to touch him. One of the man's hands was trapped under him. The other was not. Jemadar took it on instinct, as he had with dying men before.

'Australia, mate. Greatest country on earth. How about you?'

'I am from the Punjab, sir, in India. Greatest country on earth,' Jemadar said.

The man opened his eyes and squeezed Jemadar's hand.

'What's your name?' the man said. 'Sir,' he added.

'Jemadar, sir.'

'Name's Frank. And you don't have to call me 'sir'. I just fly planes.'

'Yes, sir,' said Jemadar. Frank laughed, and it hurt him.

'Frank, my name's Frank. My wife's Alice. I brought food, didn't drop it. You look like you need it.'

Frank grimaced again, his eyes closing. The grimace eased out of his face and his grip on Jemadar's hand lessened.

Jemadar looked down. A piece of metal was sticking into Frank's thigh. Right by the artery. Dark red blood was everywhere.

'I got no words, Jem,' Frank said, his eyes still closed. 'It's a long way to have come to die.'  
Frank tried to swallow.

'Good to have met you, mate,' Frank said.

Frank said nothing else.

Jemadar looked around. The others were still at a distance, scared of the wreck.

Then an officer was there.

'What are you doing? Get everything out of that contraption. Get them down to the burial site,' the officer barked.

Jemadar let go of Frank's hand.

'Good to have met you, sir,' he whispered.

Other men came, pulled the gunner's body out and emptied the supplies from the gunner's seat. Bread, and a sack of socks. But Frank's body was trapped in the crushed pilot's cockpit, so ten men picked up that part of the aeroplane and carried it to the walls, throwing it into the Tigris.

Jemadar risked punishment to follow and watch Frank sink into the river.

The next day the rains came again. Half-heartedly, like they knew summer was coming. Jemadar stood with his rifle on the roof and watched the same things he had watched for the last five months.

Another airdrop, as they were now calling it, was due. But the rain probably delayed it because it did not come. Not that day.

Tomorrow was the same.

On the third day the aeroplanes came again. Three of them, but the third was different to the other two. They came from another direction, to confuse the enemy gunners. None of them were shot down, but only half of their drops landed inside the town.

Jemadar wondered if Alice would ever know.